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# The Future of Conferences

— Adapting to a New Way of Life —

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# Background

- Program Committee met monthly, beginning in December, 2019
- Through our April, 2020 meeting, we assumed we'd meet live in Montgomery in October, 2020
  - To illustrate, items discussed at March meeting: hotel room assignments, WiFi access in hotel, dine-arounds
- May/June, 2020 - COVID's new normal:
  - Rates of COVID infection and death increased dramatically
  - Economic woes, wage cuts, furloughs
  - University and hospitals reported they would not allow leave/reimbursement for conference attendance

# Transition to Virtual

- June, 2020 - negotiations began with conference hotel in Montgomery to either cancel or renegotiate contract
- Because of the late date, cancellation would have resulted in a large fine
- Fortunately, conference hotel agreed to honor our original contract for October 19-23, 2022, for our 2022 Annual Meeting
  - October, 2021 was not an option, since SCMLA and SCCMLA had signed contract with conference hotel in New Orleans for our joint meeting. (N.B.: NOLA hotel graciously agreed to honor contract for our 2023 meeting.)

# Planning

- By July, 2020, plans for a virtual meeting were in full swing
- Discussion on scheduling the conference: when and for how long?
- Meeting date was changed from October to November to allow sufficient time to plan a meeting in a totally new format, with no precedent on which to rely
- Meeting schedule was decompressed over a 5-day period, from Monday - Friday, to allow participation by members who could not obtain leave
- Conference and CE's were free to all, thanks to generosity of NNLM financial award

# Planning

- Decision was made to have the same activities as our live meeting would have had, but in virtual format
  - Meetings, MLA and NNLM updates, paper/poster sessions, hospital librarian symposium
  - Arrangements made with CE instructors and keynote speaker to present virtually.
  - Social events: new members reception, evening events
  - Vendor participation
- McGraw-Hill graciously provided Zoom infrastructure for entire meeting. MH reps provided a training session for all conference presenters, and also provided live tech support during the entire meeting

# Feedback

- Meeting was very well attended: 130 registrants
- Evaluation Survey results were positive: “excellent” or “good” ratings for
  - Conference activities
  - Event registration, Event website
  - Program Schedule
  - Zoom: platform, accessing events.
  - Comments were very positive:
    - “Excellent meeting,” “wonderful job,” “all went very well”
    - “Everyone did a great job pivoting to virtual,” “I loved the Zoom format”
    - “Everything was easy to find on the website,” “single Zoom link for the day”

# 2021: Back to Normal?

- Meeting planning with joint chair
  - October 2020 to February 2021
- Decision to go virtual
- 2020 Meeting Feedback
  - Topics, schedule, programming
- Funding and continuing education
  - NNLM (August 2021)
- Experience from other conference planning

# Opportunities and Challenges

- Opportunities
  - Lower cost
  - Diversity of speakers and attendees
  - Flexible content/programming
  - Lower carbon footprint
  - Accessibility
- Challenges
  - Timing
  - Collaboration
  - Employee sponsorship
  - Engagement
  - Networking



# Conclusion

- Potential for hybrid meetings
  - Reach a broader audience
  - Diverse speakers
  - Engagement of attendees
  - Networking and collaboration
  - Accessibility
  - Synchronous and asynchronous events